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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the reading interests of the young adult participants in the summer reading program at Medina County District Library (Ohio). Findings were compared to research done in other locations and to current bibliographies of recommended reading for young adults. The study looked at a systematic sample of reader response forms taken from the young adult summer program. These forms asked for the reader's name, phone number, school and grade, and title and author of book. The participant was asked to circle which library branch was used, to choose one of nine categories for the book (love story, mystery/suspense, historical fiction, realistic fiction, science fiction, fantasy, nonfiction, humor, or horror/occult), and to rate the book as "Great!!!" "O.K." or "No Way!" The major findings of the study were that more girls than boys participated; most girls preferred different categories than did boys; the favorite categories were realistic fiction and mystery/suspense; none of the seven favorite authors (i.e., R. L. Stine, Francine Pascal, Ann M. Martin, Christopher Pike, Carolyn Keene, Stephen King, and Lurlene McDaniel) are found on "Best Books" lists; and there was a noticeable variety of interests. The reader response form is included in the appendix. (Contains 32 references.) (JLB)

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READING INTERESTS OF YOUNG ADULTS IN MEDINA COUNTY, OHIO

A Master's Research Paper submitted to the
Kent State University School of Library and Information Science
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree Master of Library Science

by

Sandra K. Fronius

October, 1993

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Master's Research Paper by

Sandra K. Fronius

B.A., Kent State University, 1990

M.L.S., Kent State University, 1994

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The young adult library patron of today is the adult taxpayer and potential library supporter of tomorrow. Good attitudes toward the library are formed early in life when the child enjoys story hours, puppet shows, and other special programs designed for him. But these good attitudes can be and too often are destroyed when the child becomes a teen-ager. Then, the library may seem to be an unfriendly place, where it is difficult to find materials. Adolescents are often hesitant to ask for help from librarians, whom they may perceive as "stiff, grumpy, bitchy, strict, weird, arrogant, short-tempered, power-hungry, snotty, and inflexible."[1] Similarly, perceptions librarians have of young adults may not be positive either. The librarian may expect an "ideal patron . . . someone who comes in person alone, who is quiet and respectful, who lives to read 'good books,' and who is probably a white female just like most of us."[2]

So it is not surprising that a group of young adults

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[1]Donald R. Gallo, "Ask Your Librarian!" American Libraries (November 1985): 738.

[2]Mary K. Chelton, "Issues in Youth Access to Library Services," School Library Media Quarterly (Fall 1985):22.

chose "Librarian's suggestion" last when asked where they would turn for suggestions on good books to read.[3] This is in spite of the fact that over the past seventy years or so, many librarians have put a good deal of thought and effort into guiding young adult readers toward good books. Nonetheless, research has shown that most young people have different ideas about what constitutes a "good book," than do librarians, teachers, book reviewers and other adults.

Most public libraries (89% in 1987[4]) do not employ a Young Adult Librarian. Perhaps the perception is that young people are not interested in reading, or are busy with other activities. But in fact, about 25% of public library users nationwide are young adults.[5] They are coming into the library, but perhaps not finding what they want.

The question of what they do want has been the subject of a growing body of discussion and research. One method of finding out is to ask them, through the use of a survey.

One public library system in Ohio that has used such a survey in recent years is the Medina County District Library. In 1992, participants in the summer reading program for young adults were asked to fill out a short form for each book they read. At the end of the summer, over 5,380 forms had been

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[3]Gallo, "Ask Your Librarian!" p.736.

[4]Department of Education, Services and Resources for Young Adults in Public Libraries, Survey for National Center for Education Statistics (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, July 1988): p.1.

[5]Ibid, p.5.

collected by the six branch libraries and bookmobile. Because these simple surveys were completed soon after each book was read, and because the participants were free to choose any book in the library, the information gathered should illustrate the reading interests of this group.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the reading interests of the young adult participants in the summer program at Medina County Distric Library. Findings were compared to research done in other locations, and to current bibliographies of recommended reading for young adults.

Definitions of Terms

YOUNG ADULT — Anyone entering grades six through twelve in the school system. Also, a teen-ager, adolescent, or YA.

Limitations of the Study

Participants were library users who had registered for the summer reading program. Thus they cannot be considered to be representative of the average Medina County teen-ager, nor of teen-agers in general.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A review of the literature relating to the topic of young adult reading habits reveals that there is a need for on-going research. There are several reasons for this need. First, although educators, reviewers, and librarians may do their best to recommend good books that YAs will enjoy, these selections are often passed over by young adults. Second, the very process of investigating the interests of teen-age readers may help to open up a dialog between librarians and these patrons. Finally, reading interests of young adults may be different over time or in different geographical locations. Although a considerable amount of research has been done, many different techniques have been used, producing "such different results that any generalization about results from different studies is highly suspect."[6]

The method most often used is to present young adults with a questionnaire and ask them to select their favorite category of reading material. For instance, Gallo offered a list of 25 choices, of which the respondent was to circle

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[6]Alan C. Purves and Richard Beach, Literature and the Reader; Research in Response to Literature, Reading Interests and the Teaching of Literature, (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois, 1972), p.66.

the three most preferred. Choices included sports, romance, animals, science fiction, mystery/suspense, horror/supernatural, adventure, fantasy, humor, problems of growing up, classics, war, true stories, sexuality, and more.[7] Coy-Shaffer and Pettit,[8] Kellerman,[9] and Obert[10] all used similar instruments, with varying categories.

It is very difficult to compare the results of such research, because each researcher has devised his or her own list of categories. Sometimes the lists have mixed formats and genres, such as magazine, science fiction, short story, romance. Furthermore, the categories often were undefined. Researcher and subject may have had different opinions as to what fit into a particular category. Thus results may not be dependable.

The lack of universal definitions for types of books is one problem. Another is the possible introduction of bias into the research. Most of the reported studies have been done in classroom settings. Along with the four mentioned above,

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[7]Donald R. Gallo, Students' Reading Interests: A Report of a Connecticut Survey, Paper presented at the annual Spring Conference of the Educational Paperback Association, New York, June 14, 1983, ERIC ED 232 143.

[8]Joye Coy-Shaffer and Shirley Pettit, Independent Reading in the Sixth Grade: Free Choice and Access to Material, Paper presented at the Orange County, Florida, Middle and High School Educators' Conference, Orlando, Florida, August 13-14, 1991, ERIC ED 331 039.

[9]Karen Kennedy Kellerman, "Students' Rejection of Teacher Choice of Free Reading Books" (M.A. Thesis, Kean College, 1991), ERIC ED 329 949.

[10]Beverly Obert, "Collection Development Through Student Surveys and Collection Analysis," Illinois Libraries 70 (1) (January 1988): p.50.

Grimme,[11] Isaacs,[12] Swisher,[13] and Connor[14] all have depended on the cooperation of English or Reading teachers in public schools. As yet, there has been no investigation into the possible influence of such a setting, with or without the presence of the teacher, upon the adolescent subject. Furthermore, in many of these studies the subjects were asked to recall the title of a favorite book, or the name of a favorite author. It seems likely that being in a school classroom might cause one to recall books read in school. Also, dependence on the memory of the subject might affect the accuracy of results.

Keeping these difficulties in mind, it is nevertheless helpful to review the findings of these researchers, to see what bearing they may have upon the present investigation. In 1982, Gallo sent his two-page questionnaire to teachers of English and Reading throughout Connecticut, asking that they administer the survey in one or two classes. Besides favorite categories, he also asked for titles of the three best books read during the past two years, most recent book read, and name of favorite author. From the 3,339 responses Gallo found that romance was preferred by girls, and sports by boys. Many of

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[11]Duane Grimme, "Reading Interests in the Panhandle of Nebraska," The ALAN Review (Spring 1983): p.30-34.

[12]Kathleen T. Isaacs, "Library Connections: Independent Reading: Middle School Choices," The ALAN Review (Winter 1990):p.36.

[13]Robert Swisher et al, "Involving Young Adults in Fiction Selection," Top of the News 40 Winter 1984): p.163-70.

[14]John W. Connor, et al, "1988 Books for Young Adults Poll," English Journal 77 (December 1988): p.56-60.

the favorite authors named were also read by the YAs participating in the Medina County summer program. Such authors as Judy Blume, Beverly Cleary, and Stephen King seem to have an enduring popularity.

While favorite authors or types of book may, or may not vary over time, one of Gallo's observations was especially noteworthy. That is "while most students listed a favorite title, very few students listed the same titles. Variety is therefore the most dominant quality of students' reading -- in all grades."[15]

Grimme noticed the same thing in a survey of 1,650 tenth through twelfth grade students in Nebraska. They were asked to name a book they would recommend to class-mates. "In all the 2,814 books listed, students indicated with single preferences 2,050 separate titles, everything from The Apple Dumpling Gang to Walden."[16]

Of the titles named by more than one student, The Outsiders, by S. E. Hinton, was the most-recommended book. The remaining top ten included Animal Farm, To Kill a Mockingbird, Lord of the Flies, and The Adventures of Huck Finn. As Grimme pointed out, it seemed "that classroom instruction was related to reading choices; students listed many classical titles which are commonly taught . . . . The presence of a teacher and immediacy of a classroom setting both may bias a students'

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[15]Gallo, Students' Reading Interests, p. 3.

[16]Grimme, "Reading Interests in Nebraska," p. 30.

freedom in choosing and recommending titles."[17]

In a 1989 survey, Coy-Shaffer and Pettit found that sixth grade students in central Florida preferred mysteries, adventure, and "scary" stories. Here also Judy Blume, Beverly Cleary, and Stephen King were named as favorite authors. When asked to list "books you have read and have really liked,"[18] the girls most often named titles from series: The Baby-sitter's Club, by Ann Martin, Sweet Valley Twins/Sweet Valley High, by Francine Pascal, or Nancy Drew, by Carolyn Keene. Response from the boys was more varied, but they listed Superfudge, by Blume, and the Hardy Boys series most often.

This interest in series books was not found by Isaacs, who studied sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students at a small middle school in Maryland. Instead of a survey, she used data gathered from annotations which the students prepared from independent reading. Isaacs listed the books which were read and annotated by at least five students. The most popular authors on this list were, once again, Judy Blume and Stephen King, followed by Norma Klein, Piers Anthony, and others. Go Ask Alice (anonymous author) was read by the largest number of students. As for series books, Isaacs reported that "they do appear in our annotation files, but not as often as the books described above."[19] She did not mention which series or how many annotations appeared.

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[17]Ibid., p. 32.

[18]Coy-Shaffer and Pettit, Independent Reading, p. 9.

[19]Isaacs, "Middle School Choices," p.36.

A different approach which also involved public high schools was undertaken by Swisher, et al. Their hypothesis was that if presented with a number of fiction books, students would not choose to read those which librarians would recommend for them. The group of 411 students and 18 librarians were given copies of 33 reviews from Booklist. Each participant was asked to read the reviews and to select twelve titles which should be added to the school library collection. The results did reveal a discrepancy between the choices of the YAs and those of the adults. Six of the top ten titles selected by the students did not appear on the adults' top ten list. This finding led the authors to recommend more student involvement in selecting young adult fiction.[20]

These researchers also analyzed the data to determine which types of fiction were of more interest to girls and boys in each grade level. Realistic fiction and romance were predominant among the top ten choices of the girls; boys chose science fiction, suspense, realistic fiction, historical fiction and adventure.

The divergence between the interests of YAs and the books chosen for them by adults was also the focus of another study, in 1990, by Kellerman. Eighty eighth grade students were surveyed to discover their reading interests. They were then asked to read books from a list compiled by the Educational Media Association, and to evaluate those books

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[20]Swisher et al, "Involving Young Adults," p. 170.

"according to their individual preferences and interests." The results supported Kellerman's hypothesis that "students are rejecting books recommended by teachers for their independent reading assignments because educators are ignoring student interests." She suggests that "teachers should be aware of student interests when assigning free reading books. This can be done by administering a reading interest survey/questionnaire at the beginning of the year."[21]

All of these studies suggest the importance of involving young adults in the development of the public library collection. Many libraries have instituted young adult advisory boards or councils, and guidelines for setting up such councils can be found in Voice of Youth Advocates (April 1979) and in the training manual published by ALA (Youth Participation in Libraries: A Training Manual, American Library Association, 1991).

Libraries with more limited resources may still be able to get opinions from their YA patrons through the use of surveys. A decrease in public library use by young adults in a rural area of Illinois prompted just such a survey. The questionnaire given to junior and senior high school students asked about leisure activities, how much time was spent reading, and offered a choice of categories that the reader might like "very much, somewhat, or not at all."[22] Among the choices were science fiction/fantasy, animals, poetry, sports, and cookbooks. Results of this

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[21]Kellerman, "Students' Rejection of Books," p. 9.

[22]Obert, "Collection Development Through Surveys," p. 50.

survey were used in deciding which books to purchase for the library, in the hope of increasing young adult use.

All of the above have been local in scope. One attempt to survey YAs across the United States has been the "Young Adults Choices," funded by the International Reading Association (I.R.A.) since 1986. Recently published trade books were distributed to selected schools, and students voted on their favorites. To be included in this project, the books must have "received positive reviews from at least two major reviewing sources such as Booklist, Horn Book, Journal of Reading, Language Arts, or School Library Journal."[23] Thus the students were free to choose only from books recommended by adult reviewers. Therefore, the final list may not be representative of what YAs would chose to read if left entirely to their own devices.

This assumption is supported by the work of Carter and Harris, who analyzed the ballots cast in the 1980 poll sponsored by the I.R.A. At that time the project was known as "Children's Choices," and involved students up to the eighth grade. There was no reference to reviewing sources. The project coordinators simply offered the children a wide variety of newly published books. Carter and Harris compared the books that had received the most votes from sixth to eighth grade students, with the list of books chosen as "Best Books 1980" by School Library Journal and Booklist. They found that "The students in the upper grades taking part in the balloting were

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[23]International Reading Association, "Young Adults' Choices," Journal of Reading 33 (November 1989): p. 113.

not impressed with the books favored by the professionals. Of the twenty-four "Children's Choices," only three appeared on either of the reviewer's lists."[24]

Another survey which covered a fairly large geographic area has been conducted at least four times since the 1970's. That is the San Francisco Bay Area Young Adult Librarians reading interest survey. Libraries from many counties have taken part in the survey, distributing to YA patrons a simple form asking them to name "their favorite author, title, and subject or type of book."[25]

Results of the 1982 survey showed that Blume, Cleary, and King were among the top ten authors, along with Tolkien, Steinbeck, Agatha Christie, and others. Some of the participating libraries analyzed the surveys by sex of respondent, revealing that love stories were the favorite of female readers, while adventure and mysteries topped the list for males. Of all the surveys found in the literature search, this one came closest to the methodology of the present study.

Finally, one other survey that deserves mention is the "Books for Young Adults Poll," which has been conducted through the University of Iowa since 1972. In this poll, members of a research team give recently-published books to young adults in English and reading classes in southeastern Iowa high schools.

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[24]Betty Carter and Karen Harris, "The Children and the Critics: How Do Their Book Selections Compare?" School Library Media Quarterly (Fall 1981): p. 56.

[25]Jeanie Goodhope, "Into the Eighties: BAYA's Fourth Reading Interest Survey," School Library Journal 29 (December 1982): p.33.

Series fiction is excluded. The participants' reactions to the books they choose to read are recorded in an interview process. A list of the most popular books, with the reader's comments, is published each year in English Journal. In the lists for 1982 through 1988, some of the favored authors were among those chosen by the participants in the Medina County summer reading program. These were Lois Duncan, Joan Lowry Nixon, Jay Bennet, Stephen King, Danielle Steele, Ann M. Martin, R. L. Stine, Piers Anthony, Norma Klein, and Janet Quin-Harkin.[26]

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[26]Conner et al, "Books for Young Adults," p.58-60.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The summer reading program at Medina County District Library was designed to encourage young adults to read. Signs posted in the young adult section of each branch advertised weekly drawings for prizes donated by local merchants. In order to enter the drawing, the YAs had only to complete a survey form for each book they read. The forms were available at each branch, and from the bookmobile. Completed forms were deposited in boxes provided. Any library user who was to enter grades six through twelve for the following school year was eligible to participate. They were free to choose and report on any book, from any part of the collection. About 556 young adults participated. Some returned only one survey form during the entire summer. Some returned over forty. Most of the participants returned between five and twenty forms.

On these "Teen to Teen Share A Book" forms (Appendix 1), were spaces for the participant's name, phone number, school and grade, and the title and author of each book. The participant was asked to circle which library branch was used, and to choose one of nine categories for the book: love story, mystery/suspense, historical fiction, realistic fiction, science

fiction, fantasy, nonfiction, humor, or horror/occult. He or she could also choose one of three ratings: "Great!!!," "O.K.," or "No Way!"

From the 5,380 forms collected during the summer, a systematic sample of 538 was taken by ordering the forms alphabetically by last name of participant and drawing out every tenth form, beginning from a randomly chosen starting point. These were analyzed to determine which was the favorite category for each grade, and to find if preferences were different for girls than for boys. A count of the number of readers for each author, and number of titles read, resulted in a ranking of the most popular authors. Although nonfiction did not make up a large percentage of the reading at any grade level, a close look at the books read in that category is of interest. Finally, self-reporting reliability and its relationship to category definition was analyzed.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Among the 538 forms in the sample, 441 (82%) were completed by girls, and 97 (18%) by boys. As Table 1 shows, the greatest number of participants were in the seventh and eighth grades, with the numbers decreasing substantially among the higher grades.

TABLE 1

PARTICIPATION BY GRADE LEVEL

Grade	Frequency	Percent
Six	15	3%
Seven	213	40%
Eight	183	34%
Nine	73	14%
Ten	32	6%
Eleven	15	3%
Twelve	4	.7%

These are not surprising statistics, as many researchers have found that adolescent girls read more than boys, and that interest in reading declines during these years. Various explanations have been offered for these observations, but there is no conclusive answer for why they occur. Carlsen suggested two reasons for the apparent decline in reading. One is that teen-agers are becoming more involved in other activities as they get older. The other is that "schools thrust overly mature

literature (the classics) on senior high-school students and succeed only in building antagonism toward all books."[27] There is at least one other factor to consider, however. The lower participation in the summer reading program by older teens may simply mean that they felt themselves too mature to participate. As Carter pointed out, "Older adolescents also seek identification in their reading choices, generally in adult rather than YA titles."[28]

Because there were only four participants in the twelfth grade, their responses will not be included in the discussion.

Favorite Category of Book

Table 2 shows how much reading was done in each category, by grade level. For instance, the sixth graders showed the most interest in realistic fiction; it made up 54% of their total reading. Mystery/suspense accounted for another 20%, nonfiction was 13%, and science fiction, 13%. For all grades, the first and second categories were either realistic fiction or mystery/suspense, with the latter taking the number one spot for the tenth and eleventh grades.

Realistic fiction is often defined as the modern "problem novel," where the teen-aged protagonist deals with some topical problem, such as divorce, drug abuse, or AIDS. In this study, however, a wider variety of books fell into this category. Included with problem novels were such classics as Little Women

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[27]G. Robert Carlsen, Books and the Teenage Reader, (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 6.

[28]Betty Carter, "What Are Young Adults Reading?" Educational Horizons (Summer 1987): 186.

TABLE 2

PERCENTAGE OF EACH CATEGORY READ, BY GRADE LEVEL

Category	Grade					
	Six	Seven	Eight	Nine	Ten	Eleven
Realistic Fiction	54%	42%	37%	37%	22%	20%
Mystery/ Suspense	20%	13%	21%	19%	31%	26%
Horror/ Occult	---	9%	14%	18%	3%	7%
Humor	---	9%	3%	---	6%	7%
Non-fiction	13%	9%	9%	6%	---	7%
Fantasy	13%	5%	3%	6%	---	13%
Love Story	---	5%	9%	4%	19%	7%
Historic Fiction	---	4%	1%	1%	6%	---
Science Fiction	---	3%	2%	7%	13%	13%

and Heidi. Also included were the series books such as Sweet Valley Twins/Sweet Valley High, by Francine Pascal, and Baby-Sitter's Club, by Ann M. Martin. Only 10% of boys read realistic fiction, for a total of ten books. Most of the realistic fiction was read by girls, and 50% of these books were from a series.

The term "series fiction," as used here, does not refer to such works as the Little House on the Prairie, or Ann of Green Gables series, where the lives of a group of characters are followed. The modern series are much like the Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys adventures; they use simple formulas, with each

book following a similar pattern. The characters remain fairly static from one book to the next. Although they overcome problems or learn a lesson about life, they do not grow. In each book the characters refer to previous adventures, and at the end of each book is a preview of the challenges the characters will face in the next.

Series fiction has been criticized as poorly written, with weak characterizations and unrealistic plots. Pascal and Martin have both been accused of over-emphasizing materialistic values and the importance of appearances. But these books do have some defenders. Carlsen compared them to folk literature, where repetition of a familiar pattern makes the stories easy to read. The reader knows that "no matter how impossible the situation may be, the good guys will come out on top."[29] Mackey has suggested that series fiction may help in the development of reading ability. Often the books are read out of order, which makes the references to previous and future adventures especially tantalizing. Reading them can be like putting together a puzzle. "The experience of making patterns, putting stories together, extrapolating, and confirming may be providing a crucial step towards more substantial reading."[30]

Like the older girls, boys at all grade levels preferred mystery/suspense. In many ways these books are similar to the series books. Most of them can be criticized for unreal-

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[29]Carlsen, P. 41.

[30]Margaret Mackey, "Filling the Gaps: The Baby-Sitter's Club, the Series Book, and the Learning Reader," Language Arts 67 (September 1990): p. 488.

istic plots and weak characterizations. The two most popular authors in this category, Christopher Pike and R. L. Stine, both write in an easy-to-read, fast-paced style. Usually the protagonist is a normal teen-ager who is faced with a problem or mystery that must be solved without adult help. Part of the appeal of both series fiction and the mystery/suspense books "may be because these stories deal with independent children who solve problems and cope with emergencies without the intervention of adults."[31]

While the younger girls may find the adventures in realistic series thrilling enough, with their problems of making friends, dating boys, and dealing with school pressures, the boys and older girls seem to be interested in more unlikely adventures. For them the mystery/suspense books offer villains with bizarre motives, an eerie, tense atmosphere, and often graphic descriptions of violence. Often the protagonist does not understand until the final pages what is going on, or who can be trusted. But, as in the realistic series, the "good guys" always prevail.

Unlike the girls, the boys' interests were more spread out among the categories. As can be seen in Table 3, mystery/suspense (23%) was closely followed by science fiction (19%), and nonfiction (15%). This contradicts Carlsen's statement that "Boys are more rigid and limited in their preferences, while

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[31]Adele M. Fasick, Current Research on the Reading Interests of Young People in North American, paper presented at IFLA General Conference, Chicago, Illinois, August 18-24, 1985, ERIC ED 363 801, p. 18.

girls exhibit an interest in a wider range of reading experience."[32] It is noteworthy that boys read twice as many books as girls, on a wide variety of subjects, in the category of nonfiction.

TABLE 3

PERCENTAGE OF EACH CATEGORY READ, BY GENDER

Category	Girls	Boys	Category	Girls	Boys
Realistic Fiction	44%	10%	Non-fiction	7%	15%
Mystery/ Suspense	18%	23%	Humor	3%	12%
Horror/ Occult	12%	8%	Fantasy	3%	11%
Love Story	8%	---	Historical Fiction	3%	1%
			Science Fiction	1%	19%

Nonfiction is a part of young adult reading that is often overlooked. Although it is understood that one reason teen-agers read is to try to find out about the world around them and discover how they may fit into it, researchers and educators tend to disregard the importance of nonfiction in this effort. A teen-ager may more easily identify with a real hero than with a fictional protagonist. As Carlsen pointed out, "teen readers have an enthusiasm for accounts of personal experience which border on the bizarre or unusual. . . ."[33]

The amount of nonfiction read by participants in this study

[32]Carlsen, p. 35.

[33]Ibid, p. 4.

was relatively small, but it is important to notice the variety of subjects this encompassed. Among the books were Ripley's Believe It or Not, Visitor From Outer Space, Ghosts Among Us, and Why Do Cat's Eyes Glow in the Dark? There were books about football, baseball, judo, cheer-leading, baton twirling, and the Summer Olympics; magic, yoga, horoscopes, and Nintendo. Other books covered drawing, origami, and cross-stitch; pet care, dinosaurs, computers, and drugs. Only three nonfiction books were related to television: Growing Up Brady, Yuk It Up With Urkel, and The Stars of Beverly Hills 90210.

Most Popular Authors

If we consider the most popular authors to be those whose books were read by the greatest number of survey participants, then a few favorites did emerge, as can be seen in Table 4.

TABLE 4

AUTHORS READ BY OVER 5 PARTICIPANTS

Author	Number of Readers	Number of Titles
R. L. Stine	30	39
Francine Pascal	25	48
Ann M. Martin	17	28
Christopher Pike	16	22
Carolyn Keene	13	16
Stephen King	9	11
Lurlene McDaniel	8	10

It is interesting to compare this list with the book reviews and annual lists of recommended books for YAs found in such publications as School Library Journal, English Journal, and Booklist. None of these authors has gotten the adult stamp of approval. This comes as no surprise, since several of the studies cited in the literature review found that adults tend to recommend books for YAs which the young adults would not chose for themselves.

A few of the authors (Martin, Stine, and Keene), have had books included on the list of "Recommended Books for the Reluctant Young Adult Reader," compiled by the Young Adult Services Division of ALA. "The books chosen demonstrate high appeal in content, format, and artwork; all are sixth grade or lower in reading level, have a simplicity in plot or organization, contain short sentences and paragraphs, and have uncomplicated dialogue and vocabulary."[34]

While ease of reading may be a factor in the popularity of these authors, it would be a mistake to assume that it is the primary factor. Stine's books are easy reading, but their twisted plots are designed to keep the horrified reader turning pages until the mystery is solved. The atmosphere of suspense and horror is also found in the work of Pike and King, and is apparently something that appeals to many young adults. King is the only author whose name has appeared on YAs top ten lists across the United States from 1982 to 1992. His writing is

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[34]Young Adult Services Division, American Library Association, "Recommended Books for the Reluctant Young Adult Reader," Booklist 15 April 1987: p. 1420.

certainly not aimed at the "reluctant young adult reader"; many of his books are adult best-sellers. And Lurlene McDaniel's tear-jerkers, about teen-agers with serious illnesses, are full of sophisticated medical terms.

It is likely that the chief factor operating in the popularity of these authors is their predictability. While the plots may differ from book to book, each author can be relied upon to deliver the same sort of story as in his or her last book. Furthermore, the covers of each of these books (all paperback), promise that this new adventure will be just as exciting, heart-throbbing, or scary as the last. As Betty Carter notes, "when youngsters find pleasure in reading one book, they look for another book just like the first one. This is why publishing companies package series, conveniently numbered and marked in the order they should be read."[35]

On the other hand, these seven authors wrote only 33% of the books read by this sample. Among the other 67% were books by many authors who are to be found on the recommended lists. Not only were such authors as Beverly Cleary, Lois Duncan, M. E. Kerr, and Avi among the responses, but so were Agatha Christie, George Orwell, and Harper Lee. As was evident from the nonfiction selections, and as was observed by both Gallo and Grimme, the tastes of young adults are quite varied.

Self-Reporting Reliability

Because it was left to each reader to decide into which

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[35]Carter, "What Are Young Adults Reading?" p. 185.

category to put each particular book, it was possible to measure the self-reporting reliability of this sample. It was found that readers were wrong in their choice of category 14% of the time.

In arriving at this number, allowance was made for contributing factors. If the subject had made no choice, or an obviously inappropriate choice, those were coded as inaccurate. Some of those obviously inaccurate choices included labeling a book of Hagar the Horrible cartoons as historical fiction, and choosing nonfiction for the mystery/suspense book Final Exam, by A. Bates. One respondent chose the category science fiction for the nonfiction book, It's OK to Say No to Drugs.

It is clear that the respondents could have done better in selecting categories, had the categories been better defined. Some readers circled humor for books which were realistic fiction with an element of humor, such as Lois Lowry's Anastasia series. In other cases, readers circled several categories, usualy mystery/suspense and horror/occult; sometimes mystery/suspense and love story. This response was coded as accurate, because the books in question, most of them by Christopher Pike or R. L. Stine, did contain strong elements of both. It appeared that these readers knew what kind of book they had chosen, they just couldn't fit it neatly into one of the library's categories.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The participants in the Medina County District Library's summer program showed reading interests similar to those of other groups of young people studied in other parts of the country over the past thirteen years. This study has revealed no surprises. In reviewing the findings some questions are raised. We might wonder why boys and girls differ in their interests, and why realistic fiction and mystery/suspense are so appealing. The most important question is, how can we apply what we have learned to improving library service to young adults?

First let us consider the major findings:

1) More girls than boys participated.
2) Most girls preferred different categories than did boys.
3) The favorite categories were realistic fiction and mystery/suspense.
4) None of the seven favorite authors are to be found on "Best Books" lists.
5) There was a noticeable variety of interests.

The differences in reading behavior of boys and girls have often been noted. Purves discussed this in his review of research from 1929 to 1968.[36] More recently, Moffit and Wartella found that 85% of adolescent girls read during leisure time, as

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[36]Purves, p. 93.

compared to 65% of boys.[37] While these differences can be easily measured, it is more difficult to find out why they occur.

Roberts theorized that more girls than boys participated in the summer reading program at her library because the boys had more freedom, and more organized activities such as sports in which to engage. As for their choice of books, she suggested that while girls and boys both like books about "real life," this term means something different to each group.[38] The same point was made by Carlsen, who further explained that girls like female protagonists and interior settings, while boys prefer male protagonists, outdoor settings, and physical action.[39] Numerous studies have been unable to determine whether these differences are innate or cultural. Purves suggested that "comparative studies on an international scale"[40] are needed.

The popularity of realistic fiction and mystery/suspense may be attributable to the desire of teen-agers to, as Carlsen put it, "identify and empathize with characters like themselves and work through them to find a way out of their own problems."[41] Both categories offer this experience, while from mystery/suspense the reader can also get the thrills and chills that so many teens seem to enjoy. But Jones wondered if the appeal of

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[37]Mary Ann S. Moffitt and Ellen Wartella, "Youth and Reading: A Survey of Leisure Reading Pursuits of Female and Male Adolescents," Reading Research and Instruction 31 (2) (1992): p. 6.

[38]Lorna Roberts, "Research Into Teenage Reading in London: A Preliminary Report," VOYA (October 1983): p. 242.

[39]Carlsen, pp. 34, 35.

[40]Purves, p. 95.

[41]Carlsen, p. 9.

mystery/suspense is that these book provide escape, or that they provide "a metaphor for YAs looking for clues to the mystery of their own identity?"[42]

Theories and opinions seem to make up much of the discussion of adolescent reading preferences. Although experience working with teen-agers and a knowledge of adolescent psychology may lend weight to these theories, there is a lack of concrete evidence behind them. Fasick called for further research into the reasons why young people choose the books they do, saying that, "This kind of insight would help writers, publishers and librarians to make available books which children can understand and to which they will respond deeply."[43]

But can such insight be obtained through scientific research? It may be difficult to design studies of reading behavior because the problem is so complex. Many factors are involved in the reading habits of any individual. The amount of time a person devotes to reading books is affected by his early experiences with books, his beliefs about what it means to be a reader, his perceptions about the library and librarians, his ability to locate books that are appealing, the amount of time available for reading, and the priority it has among activities. Most studies so far have focused on the reading of books, often only fiction. But young adults read many other kinds of materials. For a true understanding of

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[42]Patrick Jones, Connecting Young Adults and Libraries: A How-To-Do-It Manual (New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, Inc. 1992): p.46.

[43]Fasick, p. 18.

reading interests, any study should include newspapers, magazines, comic books, maybe even baseball cards and auto repair manuals.

Furthermore, even a study limited to the reasons an individual chooses to read a particular book must consider many factors. The reader may make a selection based on the sex of the protagonist, or the setting, or the genre. The physical appearance of the book may be important, including the number of pages, size of print, paperback or hardcover format, and whether or not the cover is eye-catching. Many readers are loyal to a particular author, but is it the theme or the writing style that is appealing? Often the reader herself is unable to explain just why a book was chosen. We are far from an objective understanding of individual reading behavior. The kind of insight Fasick calls for is more likely to be gained from personal experience, the experience that can be acquired and used by the Young Adult Librarian.

Of what use, then, is a survey such as this one? If the goal is to improve library service to young adults, then the most important finding is the diversity of interests shown by this group.

At first glance, it seems most significant and troubling that the seven most popular authors are not among those recommended by adult reviewers. How are we to guide young adults toward books which they will both enjoy and learn from, if they reject adult opinions? Perhaps we should just stock the shelves with books written by the most popular authors. But only 33% of the books read were written by these authors. Looking at the

other 65%, we realize that these young people, like adults, are individuals with a variety of tastes. Some of them often choose to read for pleasure or escape. Others choose to read more challenging, rewarding books.

Therefore, it is important for the public library to provide a wide range of books, fiction and nonfiction, on all sorts of subjects, at all levels of reading difficulty. As Carter said, "If children find titles that entertain and amuse them, they may come to see literature as a varied and infinite source of pleasure and satisfaction."[44]

The Young Adult Librarian is in a unique position to help young people to arrive at this discovery. He can become familiar with the patrons and the books they read. By talking with and listening to individual patrons, he can help them to discover what sort of reading material it is that they need and want, and then help them to find it. The Young Adult Librarian can solicit opinions from patrons through the use of surveys, and use that information, with reviews and "Best Books" lists, to build a balanced collection. If we want to encourage young adults to continue reading, and keep them involved with the public library, it is apparent that the most important thing we can do is to provide them with a librarian who works to bring this about.

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[44]Carter and Harris, "The Children and the Critics," p. 57.

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APPENDIX 1

X Name: _____

Phone: _____

School: _____

Grade: _____

Circle One: Medina Lodi Bookmobile
Hinckley Brunswick Seville
Do Not Separate

ADMIT ONE ADMIT ONE

Wild about reading '92
Teen To Teen Share A Book

ADMIT ONE ADMIT ONE

Author: _____ Title: _____

Type of Book (circle one)

X Love Story
Mystery/Suspense
Historical Fiction
Realistic Fiction
Science Fiction
Fantasy
Non-Fiction
Humor
Horror/Occult

Did You like It? (circle one) Great!! O.K. No Way!

If you would like to recommend this book to other teenagers, write a little bit about it on the back of this card. It will be placed in the Young Adult Share A Book File.
Check there for suggestions of what to read.
Put ENTIRE card in the Wild About Reading box in Young Adult Section.
Ask about your library's prize drawing.

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